Met Office

NEWS

Twelve steps to safer driving this winter

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As winter starts to take hold we have been working with the RAC and Highways England to create twelve top tips for safer winter driving.

With temperatures having dropped significantly, and snow expected over the next few days across many parts of the country, road conditions will be increasingly tricky for motorists, and they need to take the necessary precautions.

Met Office Meteorologist Aidan McGivern comments: “Cold air from the Arctic has been drawn south in the wake of Storm Caroline, bringing the first real taste of winter. On Friday, many parts of the country can expect to see snow showers, with temperatures by day only a few degrees above freezing. At night it’ll be frosty with lows generally around minus five in the countryside and as low as minus ten over snow covered mountains. We are also expecting snow to affect many of Wales and central England on Sunday, so with National Severe Weather Warnings in force drivers in particular will need to regularly check the forecast so they can be prepared.”

According to research there are 1.56 million private car drivers who have suffered at least one accident in the last five years due to winter road conditions. Figures from the Association of British Insurers suggest the average cost of a claim for accidental damage to a vehicle was £1,362 in the first quarter of 2017, with 312,382 accidents estimated to have been caused through winter conditions – leading to a total estimated cost of £425,465,373 per year.

According to the RAC many drivers fail to make some basic checks on their cars which could help avoid an unnecessary breakdown or an accident. Almost one in five (17%) say they check the condition and tread of their tyres only once every six months or less and 13% admit that they only check the pressures at six monthly intervals or even less often. Remember good tyre tread essential to keep a good grip on the road especially in icy conditions.

Worryingly one in six (16%) motorists say they, at best, check their oil level only every six months and a similar number (17%) check their coolant level at this long interval – two key DIY steps that could have a big impact on whether or not your car breaks down and can lead to very costly repairs. This fact is backed up by RAC patrols who routinely check member's oil levels when they attend a breakdown and find that one in three vehicles is running dangerously low on oil.

The Met Office deploys dedicated meteorologists based at Highways England, Transport Scotland and the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The advice they give enables transport agencies to take the appropriate action, from clearing snow to gritting the roads, to help keep motorists moving safely.

Highways England's customer service director, Melanie Clarke, said: "We work closely with our colleagues at the Met Office to ensure we have accurate real-time weather information over the winter months. From gritting teams to our dedicated traffic officer patrol service, we will be doing all in our power to clear incidents and keep people moving this Christmas. We're also keeping 99 per cent of the road network we manage free from roadworks from 22 December to help people get to their destinations with as little disruption as possible."

See below for the Met Office's guide to winter road safety, in partnership with RAC and Highways England.

12 steps of winter road safety

1. Check the Met Office forecast for your route

Weather can change rapidly, especially in winter. Stay ahead of the weather by keeping up to date with the latest forecasts, so that you can plan and adapt your journey accordingly. For the most reliable updates on weather forecast, head to www.metoffice.gov.uk or check the Met Office app.

2. Make DIY car checks part of your routine

As well as having your car professionally serviced regularly, there are simple checks you can do yourself before long journeys to keep your car in good working order. Get in the habit of checking your oil and coolant levels, as well as checking wiper blades for wear and tear and that your screen wash is topped up and effective down to at least -15 degrees centigrade. These checks are good practice throughout the year, but especially during winter when weather can have a greater impact on the condition of your vehicle.

3. Check your fog lights before every journey

Fog can be very localised and tricky to predict. Because of this, even if it looks clear when you set off, you should check your lights are working properly ahead of every journey. Remember that you should use your headlights when visibility is less than 100 meters – about the length of a football pitch. Only use your rear fog lights when visibility is significantly reduced and remember to turn them off as soon as it improves. If visibility is really limited, wind down your windows at junctions to allow you to listen out for approaching traffic.

4. Don't rely on your smartphone

Phones may be multi-purpose tools, but in the event of a breakdown on the side of a country road at night, a phone light won't give you enough visibility, and you might not have enough service to accurately pinpoint your location. Instead, keep a torch and a paper road atlas in your car, so you can preserve your phone for making emergency calls.

5. Keep a winter kit in the car at all times

Make sure you're prepared for the worst by keeping warm clothes, a blanket, food and water in the car. A long wait in the cold for a breakdown pick-up will be all the more comfortable with these at hand.

6. Leave enough time to de-ice your car before work

Travelling over Christmas can be stressful and often causes people to rush. If you anticipate being in a hurry and are experiencing extreme cold or snowy conditions, set aside some time to thoroughly de-ice your car. Driving with snow or ice may potentially be a criminal offence if driving under reduced visibility – so make sure you leave enough time before work to properly de-ice every window in your car.

7. Don't underestimate winter sun

Low sun levels in winter can be dangerous, seriously affecting your visibility. Keep a pair of sunglasses to hand to stop yourself being dazzled by glare.

8. Keep your battery healthy

Failing car batteries are a major reason for breakdown call-outs at this time of year, so make sure yours is regularly maintained, charged and in good health. Keep a set of jump start cables or jump leads in the car, and make sure you know how to use them!

9. Know how to react when a storm hits

It's safest to avoid travelling until a storm has cleared, but if you do find yourself on the road, stick to main roads if possible where you are less likely to encounter fallen branches and flooding. Grip your steering wheel tightly to keep control of your vehicle through gusts of wind, and keep an eye out for gaps between trees or buildings, where you are more likely to encounter side winds.

10. If in doubt, don't risk driving through flood water

If you're unsure how deep an area of flooding is, don't enter it. If you do have to drive through a flooded road, stick to the highest section of the road and drive slowly without stopping. Once clear of the water, check your brakes and dry them out as much as possible – a light touch of the brakes while moving should be enough.

11. When snow hits, take it slow

When driving in snow, accelerate gently, using low revs. To avoid skidding, try pulling away in second gear, and avoid braking suddenly, which could lock up your wheels. As well as taking it slow, give yourself more space on the road – you may need 10 times the normal gap between you and the car in front.

12. Keep your tyres in check

In icy and rainy conditions, it's even more important to have tyres with enough grip. Check the condition of your tyres (including the spare) for the correct pressure, as well as for their tread depth – which should, by law, be at least 1.6mm for cars but it may be worth considering replacing them before they get to this depth.

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